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CHARLES DEMUTH



CHARLES DEMUTH

EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

BY

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NEW YORK
WILLIAM EDWIN RUDGE
1927

PREFACE

I

*I*N my book on the *American Water-Colourists*, published in 1922, mention was made of the fact that Charles Demuth was not represented in any of the public museums. Happily, that state of affairs no longer prevails: since then Demuth's water-colours have been added to the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University, the Brooklyn Museum, the Cleveland Museum and the Rochester Museum. His water-colours have also been acquired by the semi-public Barnes Foundation, at Merion, Pennsylvania, and Phillips Memorial Gallery, at Washington.

The Barnes Foundation owns over fifty examples, including many of the vaudeville subjects, as well as a

number of the illustrations. These were purchased shortly after the time of their execution. Mr. Ferdinand Howald's comprehensive collection of the vital contemporary American painters, probably the most important that has been formed, includes over thirty Demuths, choice and varied examples of the artist's work. Eventually this collection, together with a number of contemporary French pictures, is to be offered to the Columbus Museum.

II

This steady acquisition of Demuths by the museums is certainly a very encouraging sign, for even that rare being, the curator with a flair for art, in addition to his antiquarian knowledge, finds that politics and the dead hand of officialdom are both exceedingly difficult things to set aside. What would happen to the artist in the socialist state it is not very agreeable to contemplate. If the state and the museums continued to give their patronage exclusively to the types of painters and sculptors whom they now encourage, the true artist no doubt would very shortly disappear. It is invariably the private collector who pur-

chases the paintings by the genuine artists. In France, especially in Paris, the number of collectors who buy the work of the newer painters of talent and originality is very numerous. Never before indeed has this class of collectors been anywhere near as large as it is to-day. It would seem as if almost every other person in France was interested in the modern movement, while on the other hand one rarely hears of sales taking place at the Salon. This class of collector is steadily increasing in America, but it is still a very small group. If the very modest prices asked by the newer men in Paris prevailed in America the interest taken in their work would no doubt be much greater. It is a mistake to assume that it is only the man of large means who possesses taste and the desire to collect. This has been proved by the numerous sales made at the Whitney Studio Club in New York of pictures and drawings by the younger men.

Undoubtedly recognition by the public and consequent fame come much sooner to the painter after he has entered the museums. This inspires confidence. Very unfortunate it is, therefore, that the men on whom the museums have conferred a certain temporary fame are men of no ability.

Indeed, having in mind the way practically all museums, whether situated in London, Paris or New York, have squandered public funds when it has come to purchasing living art, one cannot but have serious doubts as to the desirability of museums pursuing this policy at all. If they insist upon only buying pictures exhibited at the Salon, the Royal Academy and the National Academy of Design, they had, of course, much better confine themselves solely to the old masters. In this field museums can amuse themselves to their hearts' content with questions of attributions, restorations, pedigrees and other matters, can now even have their pictures X-rayed, without being troubled with mere æsthetic considerations.

On the other hand, when museums buy contemporary art in an intelligent manner, as some of them are now buying Demuths and as they will some day buy Marins, of course they are pursuing the right course. In that event a museum enjoys not only the distinction of having been adventurous and of buying at a time when it was possible to buy really fine examples, when the choice was greater and the prices more advantageous, but above all of having done something for the artist and the whole cause of modern art.

While on the subject of the museums' encouragement of the mediocre in living art and their great indifference to what is significant, it may be of interest to note what has been recently taking place at the Luxembourg Museum, the National Gallery, Millbank (Tate Gallery) and the Art Institute of Chicago. For these institutions, in varying degree, have of late been displaying distinctly encouraging symptoms in their attitude towards what is known as the modern movement.

Certain things happened at the Musée du Luxembourg in the spring of 1926. With the change of curatorship, one might have hoped that the new broom would make a clean sweep. Nothing of the kind occurred: too much political pressure was brought to bear, of which some interesting stories might be told. However, at least some alterations did take place, which has somewhat improved the appearance of these galleries. For one thing, the portion of the Caillebot collection which the Luxembourg was forced to accept against their wishes (a section of it they did succeed in keeping out) has now been removed from two unimportant galleries and given the place of honour in the collection. This group of Renoirs, Manets, Cézannes, Lautrecs,

Degas, Monets, Gauguins, Pissarros, Sisleys and Van Goghs is now to be seen to great advantage. This was the collection which the authorities once turned down, for, as the Beaux Arts professors said, if these men be right, then we must be wrong. Since these artists are now all represented in the Louvre, I suppose the Luxembourg could hardly do less. A considerable number of typical Salon pictures have now been banished to provincial museums. Whistler's portrait of his mother, once refused at the Royal Academy (but finally hung in the black and white room) has gone to the Louvre. A vitrine of Tiffany glass has made way for one filled with sculpture by Maillol. A number of living men possessing talent have been given space, including Matisse, Bonnard, Friesz, Marquet, Lotiron, Signac, Vlaminck and Utrillo.

That Great Britain is beginning to take an interest in the contemporary movement in France was clearly shown by the opening in June, 1926, of a Gallery of Modern Foreign Art in connection with the National Gallery, Millbank. Among the living men in the permanent collection one notes the presence of Bonnard, Braque, Roualt, Vuillard and Utrillo. With the Courtault fund have been

purchased fine examples of Manet, Renoir, Degas, Seurat, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Sisley and Pissarro, in addition to the living Bonnard and Utrillo. A decided improvement over the pictures bought with the Chantry Bequest! The Lane collection, which includes a number of important Impressionist pictures, is now permanently installed in one of these new galleries, in place of the insignificant room which formerly housed it. This is no doubt a satisfactory solution of the question as to whether Sir Hugh Lane wished his pictures to go to Dublin or to London, since it gives England the pictures and Ireland her grievance. On loan from June, 1926, to the following October was an admirable selection of works by living Frenchmen, owned in England. This collection included a splendid group of nine Matisses and other paintings by Braque, Bonnard, Dufresne, Derain, Dufy, Roualt, de Segonzac, Picasso, Utrillo, Laurencin and Vlaminck. These pictures, taken together with those by Corot, Courbet, Delacroix, Daumier, Puvis de Chavannes, Morisot, Van Gogh and numerous other masters, both owned and on loan, in addition to those already mentioned, made a remarkably impressive exhibition. Clive Bell in the next edition of his book, Since

Cézanne, will have to modify his statement that one does not go to the Tate Gallery to see works of art.

The most comprehensive collection of contemporary French paintings owned by an American museum is that at the Art Institute of Chicago. Matisse, Picasso, Friesz, Derain, Lotiron, de Segonzac, Lhote and Utrillo are all represented, in addition to examples of Cézanne, Manet, Lautrec, Monet, Gauguin, Modigliani, Henri Rousseau, Seurat and Van Gogh.

A. E. G.

Summer, 1926

CHARLES DEMUTH

IT IS interesting to note the great attraction which water-colour has had for the contemporary American painter, several of the most important of whom have chosen this medium almost to the exclusion of oil, while still others have executed a considerable part of their work in water-colour. Indeed, this preference for water-colour is nothing new in the history of American painting, as such names as those of Winslow Homer, much of whose most important work was executed in water-colour, Whistler and Sargent bear witness.

Aside from his etchings, which are important, made for the most part some years ago, and perhaps half a dozen essays in pastel or oil, John Marin's

exhibited work has been executed exclusively in water-colour. Charles Demuth, one of the most highly gifted of living water-colourists, and the subject of this essay, has painted in both oil and in tempera, but water-colour has been his chief concern, and his fame no doubt will largely rest upon his work in this medium. The talented Charles Burchfield, the inimitable portrayer of sordid railway junction towns and amazing main streets of mid-western towns, very rarely works in any medium but water-colour. Preston Dickenson, who has brilliantly interpreted such subjects as the new architectural forms created by groups of factories, and the lately deceased Maurice Prendergast, a painter of authority, with a fine sense of decoration, are artists whose allegiance has been perhaps about equally divided as regards the employment of oil and water-colour. This is also true of Jules Pascin, American at least by naturalization; his finely organized drawings, in pencil or in ink, washed with water-colour, are perhaps of even more importance than his delicate paintings in oil.

Marin and Demuth, the most important figures in contemporary American painting, have evolved their forms in altogether different manners. Their temperaments differ as much as do the results of their investigations. Marin's water-colours are at times as lyrical as the poetry of Shelley, at other times they are dynamic in pent-up energy. They have been washed-in rapidly in the white heat of inspiration. Demuth's drawings are always most carefully and beautifully organized. He has aimed at perfection, which usually he has obtained. His water-colours and paintings are as fine in form and as delicately wrought as the essays of Max Beer-bohm.

Charles Demuth was born at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1883. He studied for some time at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia, after which, in 1912, he left for Paris, where he continued his studies for a period of a little less than two years. It was soon after this that the artist's talent began to develop into a personal expression and the remarkable series of illustrations for

various works of fiction and drawings of vaudeville performers were started, shortly after his return to America. He continued to work on these drawings from time to time for the next five years, but has not produced any further work in this vein since 1919.

The period of the illustrations and vaudeville drawings, while the first in the artist's development, proved to be one of the most important, for some of Demuth's very finest things are to be found in these two sets of water-colours. The imaginative drawings which illustrate various works of fiction, by French, American and German authors, have not been published with their accompanying text. Their interest, it is not quite necessary to note, is of course an æsthetic one and it is not because they are illustrations that we derive pleasure from them, any more than we do from Aubrey Beardsley's. Demuth's and Beardsley's illustrations interest us as independent works of art. These drawings of Demuth comprise some half dozen designs for Zola's novel *Nana*, a single design for Balzac's short

story entitled *The Girl With the Golden Eyes*, for which Charles Conder also made illustrations, four drawings for Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, three for this writer's *The Beast in the Jungle*, one for Poe's tale *The Masque of the Red Death* and seven for a play by Wedekind, a modern German dramatist, entitled *Esdgeist*.

In executing these illustrations the artist has first made a drawing outlined in pencil, upon which he has imposed washes of colour. His line is extremely sensitive and nervous, and the washes of delicate and alluring colour play an important part in organizing the design. The essence of the scene has in each case been portrayed. This is also true of the series of drawings of acrobats, dancers and other vaudeville performers, of which there are some eighty or ninety. Drawn at Lancaster, where the artist lives, these water-colours have been executed in much the same spirit as the illustrations. The use of contrasting backgrounds has in these drawings been employed to great advantage. They are enlivened with flashes of wit and especially in the vaudeville

series there is that sense of reality and throb of life which one is always conscious of in the marvellous drawings made at the theatre and dance-hall by Toulouse-Lautrec.

Demuth's studies of flowers are no doubt the examples of his work which are most familiar to the public, for since the earliest days of his career he has been engrossed in the delineation of flower forms, and this interest shows no signs of abating. These water-colours the artist has produced in great profusion. The earlier ones are sometimes almost dainty in appearance, but as the years have passed they have taken on new and richer forms. His renderings of clusters of tulips, zinnias, cyclamen, daisies, gladioli and native pink orchids are possessed of a strange beauty, and that undefinable thing known as quality abounds in them. At times the wash is positively waxy in its subtle modulations, at other times the colour glows. Very often the curved forms of contrasting colour which compose the background and knit the design together show us what a genuine contribution to art was made by the Cubists

and of what service their theories have been to the majority of the worthwhile men painting to-day. An intelligent use of the investigations of the Cubists is also discernible in the artist's interpretations of factories and other buildings, but, as in the studies of flowers, this influence is seen more especially in the backgrounds. The drawings of houses which the artist made in Bermuda are beautifully felt and set down with exquisite taste, notably successful in design and possessing passages of delicate and entrancing colour. Studying them, one thinks of the dictum of Sir Francis Bacon: "There is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in the proportion." Becoming absorbed, as have a number of other American painters, with the distinctly new and original notes to be found in contemporary American architecture, but in his case especially as expressed in the construction of factories and mills, Demuth evidently came to the conclusion that oil and tempera were more appropriate media for the delineation of lofty chimneys, iron girders and red brick façades than the more fragile medium of

water-colour. These unlovely things, belonging so distinctly to our era of commercialism and mass production, have been made lovely by Demuth's rare art. Including several other pictures, among them paintings of colonial churches, there are about forty of these paintings, about half of them executed in oil and about half in tempera. They are, if anything, even more conspicuous for their precision of execution than the water-colours. Not only beautiful, on account of their harmony and unity, these paintings of modern industrial America would at times almost seem to strike a note of gaiety. The titles, too, are witty, as witness such a one as that given to the painting of the two great chimneys which side by side rear themselves against a pale blue sky: Aucassin and Nicolette. One recalls, with great satisfaction, the uproar and indignation this title caused in academic circles. These pictures, it may be noted, were painted for the most part at Coatesville, an industrial town in Pennsylvania, and at Provincetown. Another of the paintings is the only picture Demuth made during his visit to Paris in

1921, an interesting view of a street, patterned with windows, which bears the title Rue du Singe qui Pèche. This picture is in tempera: another, in oil, painted immediately after the artist's return to America, is the Paquebot Paris, two of her three red funnels outlined against the sky.

Quite recently Demuth has been turning his attention to the painting of still-life subjects, with fruits and vegetables as the motives. These water-colours mark a new phase in his development. The compositions, for one thing, have become rather more ambitious, his sheets of paper decidedly larger. The artist's technique has undergone certain changes as well. These still-lives are very handsome and take their place with the artist's finest things. It is possible, however, that certain of Demuth's admirers find more charm in the flower subjects, with their note of graciousness. These fruits and vegetables are very cool. The juiciness of a peach by Renoir or the passion which Cézanne put into an apple are not to be found here. This is not voluptuous fruit: it comes from a country whose *vin du pays* is iced water.

No note on Demuth's work would be complete without reference to a set of four paintings which the artist executed in 1924—*hommages* to John Marin and three other painters. These are very lively and entertaining canvasses, fine examples of craftsmanship and splendid in colour. I agree with Henry McBride that in this country there should be more homage done to artists by artists than there is. In France, they order these matters far better, as Mr. Yorick of Sterne's Sentimental Journey once said on another occasion. Not only the artist-painters, but the politicians as well. Indeed, were New York Paris, no doubt but that a portion of Broadway eventually would become, at least for a time, Boulevard John Marin, a segment of Park Avenue Charles Demuth. Which would be rather nice.

REPRODUCTIONS

MARSHALL'S
(WATER-COLOUR)



ACROBATS
(WATER-COLOUR)



VAUDEVILLE
(WATER-COLOUR)



DANCERS
(WATER-COLOUR)



ILLUSTRATION FOR HENRY JAMES'S THE TURN OF THE SCREW
(WATER-COLOUR)



ILLUSTRATION FOR HENRY JAMES'S THE TURN OF THE SCREW
(WATER-COLOUR)



ILLUSTRATION FOR HENRY JAMES'S THE TURN OF THE SCREW
(WATER-COLOUR)



ILLUSTRATION FOR HENRY JAMES'S THE TURN OF THE SCREW
(WATER-COLOUR)



ILLUSTRATION FOR HENRY JAMES'S THE BEAST IN THE JUNGLE
(WATER-COLOUR)



ILLUSTRATION FOR HENRY JAMES'S THE BEAST IN THE JUNGLE
(WATER-COLOUR)



ILLUSTRATION FOR HENRY JAMES'S THE BEAST IN THE JUNGLE
(WATER-COLOUR)



ZINNEAS
(WATER-COLOUR)



TULIPS
(WATER-COLOUR)



CYLAMIN
(WATER-COLOUR)



PLUMS
(WATER-COLOUR)



HOUSES AND TREE FORMS—PROVINCETOWN
(WATER-COLOUR)



NEW ENGLAND
(TEMPERA)



END OF THE PARADE
(TEMPERA)



A BOX OF TRICKS
(TEMPERA)



AFTER CHRISTOPHER WREN

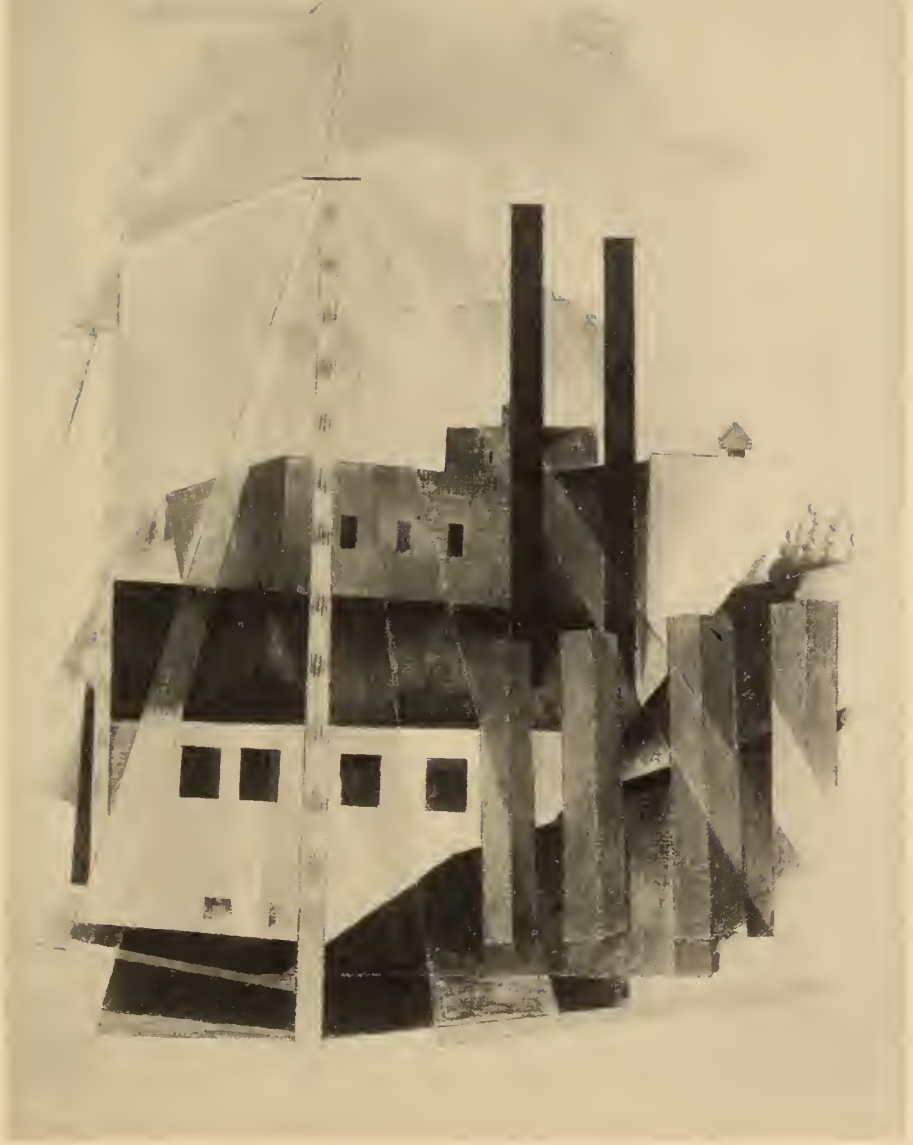
(TEMPERA)



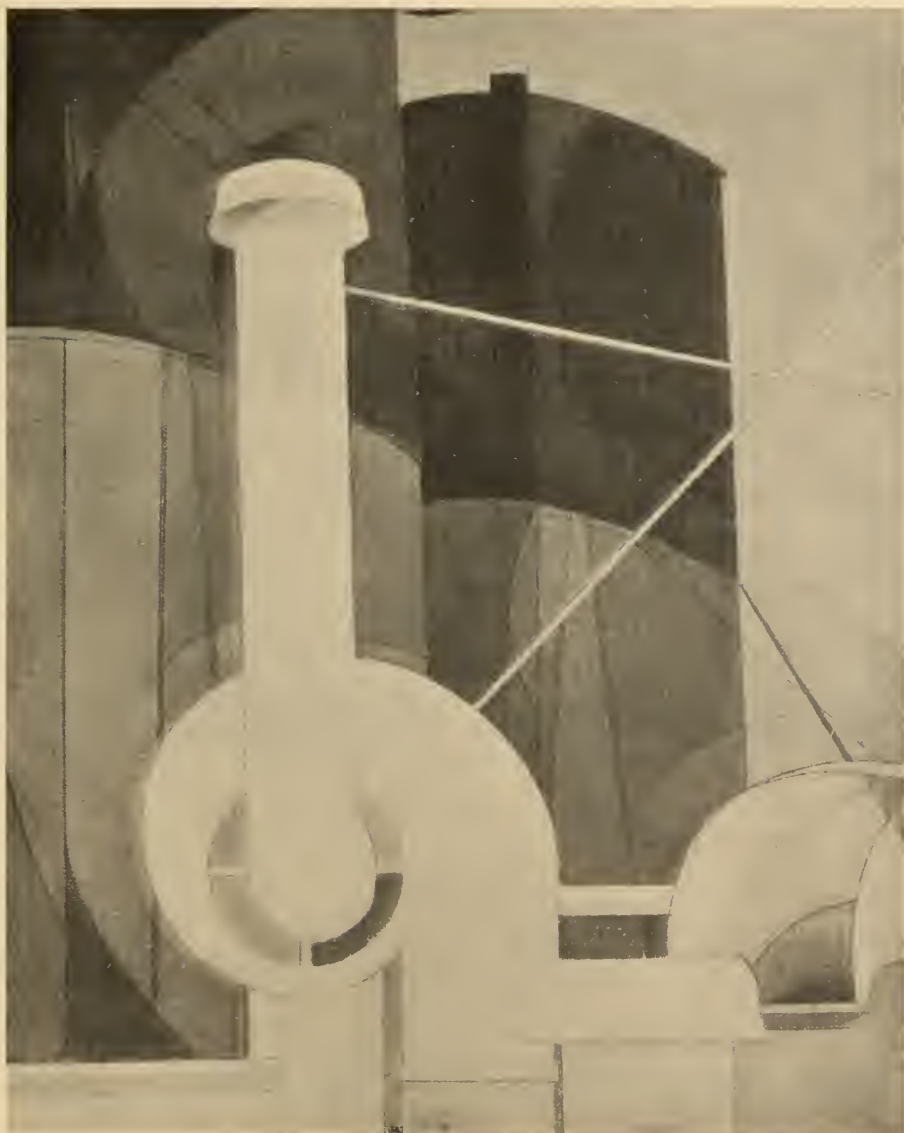
LANCASTER
(TEMPERA)



THE PIANO MOVER'S HOLIDAY
(TEMPERA)



PAQUEBOT, PARIS
(OIL)



STILL-LIFE
(WATER-COLOUR)



STILL-LIFE
(WATER-COLOUR)



POSTER FOR GEORGIA O'KEEFFE
(OIL)



CALLA LILIES—A DECORATION
(TEMPERA)



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